
Development of Essential Policies for Public Libraries

Wisconsin Trustee Training Module #2



Library Policies

- Some experts assert that except for the employment of a library director, no other duty of the library board is as important to the library and the community it serves as the duty to establish library policies.





Library boards have the authority to establish both:

- “External policies” (policies that determine how the library serves the public), and
- “Internal policies” (policies that govern library board operations and library management)



Wisconsin's library law gives library boards the legal authority to establish both “external” and “internal” policies

- “Every public library shall be...subject to such reasonable regulations as the library board prescribes in order to render its use most beneficial to the greatest number. The library board may exclude from the use of the public library all persons who willfully violate such regulations.” [43.52(2)]
- “...the library board shall supervise the administration of the public library and shall appoint a librarian...and prescribe [library employee] duties and compensation.” [43.58(4)]



Basic distribution of responsibilities for library policies

- The library director recommends policies and provides the board with the information needed to evaluate the proposed policy and any alternatives.
- The library board approves policies and regularly reviews policies to make any needed changes.
- The library director makes sure all library staff understand the policies and follow them.



What are some essential policies for a public library?

- Service (including hours open)
- Circulation
- Collection development
- Confidentiality of patron records
- Meeting room use
(if the library has a public meeting room)
- Personnel
- Use of electronic resources

For samples of these and other policies see
http://pld.dpi.wi.gov/pld_policies



What makes for a good policy?

- Complies with law
- Promotes the best interest of all members of the community
- Consistent with the library's mission
- Fair to all and respectful of individual rights and individual differences
- Easily understood
- Promotes positive public image for library



Steps in the development of library policies

1. Director, with staff (and maybe public) input, develops recommended policies.
2. Board discusses and approves policies.
(See next slide.)
3. Director makes sure staff and public are aware of policies.
4. Board reviews policies on a regular cycle so all policies are reviewed at least every three years.



In board consideration of policy matters, trustees should:

- Give adequate time and attention to all policy deliberations.
- Be satisfied that policy is legal, clear, reasonable, and that all ramifications are understood.
- Make sure policies are documented and available to staff and public.
- Actively support officially established library policies.





Four tests of a legally-enforceable policy

1. It must comply with current statutes and court cases.
2. It must be reasonable (and all penalties must be reasonable).
3. It must be clear (not ambiguous or vague).
4. It must be applied without discrimination.



Examples of test #1: It must comply with current statutes and court cases.

- A library policy charging patrons for use of computers in the library would be contrary to Wis. Stats. section 43.52(2).
- A policy that says the library's public meeting room cannot be used for religious purposes would be unconstitutional under a Wisconsin federal district court decision.



Example of test #2: It must be reasonable (and all penalties must be reasonable).

- A library policy that says “all talking in the library is prohibited and anyone who talks in the library will permanently lose library use privileges” is clearly an unreasonable rule with an unreasonably harsh penalty.



Example of test #3: It must be clear (not ambiguous or vague).

- A policy that says “library use privileges will be revoked if a patron has too many overdue books” is too vague to be fairly administered.



Example of test #4: It must be applied without discrimination.

- If a library charges fines, it cannot give preferential treatment to some patrons. For example, if the library sometimes waives fines, that waiver must be available to all patrons on an equal basis—not just to friends of library staff or politically important people.





Discussion questions:

1. What steps can be taken that help a library develop good policies?
2. What would be an example of a “bad” library policy and why is it bad?
3. What should a library trustee do if he/she disagrees with a library policy?
4. Who is responsible for carrying out library policies?



For more information:

- visit the Wisconsin Public Library Policy Resources webpage at http://pld.dpi.wi.gov/pld_policies

Or contact:

- Your library system staff
- Your municipal attorney
- Walter Burkhalter, Consultant, Public Library Administration, (608) 266-7270 or walter.burkhalter@dpi.wi.gov

